

# Reflections on the Three-Block Movie-English Method: Adjustment and Supplementation

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In Howell (2015), an outline was given of an innovative approach to movie English using novelizations alongside feature films. I christened the approach the ‘h3Bt’ or ‘Head-Three Block-Tail’ method. It included in each lesson three blocks of activities focused respectively on a scene from the film, the corresponding extract from the novelization, and rotating paired conversations using questions provoked by the scene and extract. Each lesson ended with a tail activity serving as a ‘teaser’ for the following week’s movie scene, an activity which was then reprised at the head of the next lesson in the hope of facilitating a smooth end to each class and a sense of anticipation towards the next one. The rationale for focusing on one film was that working through high-impact scenes of one entire film provided a narrative unity to a course of listening and speaking lessons which would be absent if dialogues from separate movies were used in each separate lesson of the course. Moreover, if the film used was a popular one, it was not unreasonable to assume that many students would want to watch it anyway, even if they were not forced to watch it in an educational institution. The rationale for using novelizations was that adaptors are often required to stick extremely closely to the script and the dialogue therein, and therefore if a dialogue from a film was used in conjunction with the corresponding extract from the novelization, it permitted essentially the same English material to be presented in differing semiotic channels with some recycling of vocabulary items. Japanese translations of novelizations have also been published, and this enabled me as an English native-speaker teacher to introduce Japanese language support into the classroom without actually having to speak Japanese at a high level myself.

## BACKGROUND

Student feedback reported in a previous article on the ‘h3Bt’ method indicated a strong sense of enjoyment on the part of participants in a course of lessons using this method, and a somewhat lesser sense of the method’s usefulness. This might be taken to indicate an already satisfactory level of success. But part of the contemporary discourse of professionalism is that foreign language teaching professionals should reflect on their practice (Wallace 1991). This second paper therefore reflects on my own practice in using movies in English lessons and offers follow-up information to my report on the three-block method developed for using films and their novelizations (Howell 2015). It offers new information in that it reports how the method has been adjusted and supplemented in the past year. By “adjustment” is meant non-fundamental changes made to *activities* as a result of reflection on previous implementation, and by “supplementation” is meant the use of new *materials and media* in addition to film and print. This article is a descriptive report, presenting subjective reflections on a method which assumes English teaching to be primarily a cultural, rather than an instrumental and functional activity. No empirical claims whatsoever are made as to the ‘efficiency’ of the method for learning English, although some simple questionnaire responses will be

presented to re-confirm affective success within the particular context of first-year students at a national university in Japan (Hiroshima University).

## ADJUSTMENT

Since the writing of the previous article, the method has been adjusted in five main ways:

1. resequencing of blocks
2. reduction of activities;
3. colorization of hand-outs;
4. use of expansion drills;
5. increase of L1 input.

Resequencing of the blocks involved switching the order of the three blocks from Movie > Novelization > Conversation to Novelization > Movie > Conversation. This was done because, on reflection, it was thought that a Novelization > Movie sequence would be more likely to create a sense of anticipation in students than a Movie > Novelization sequence. The rationale for offering movie classes is precisely that participants enjoy watching feature films (not necessarily reading novels), and in terms of planning chronology, each lesson has its origin in a dialogue from the movie. So it perhaps makes sense to place the Movie Block at the core of the lesson.

Reduction of activities is achieved by dropping choral reading from the Novelization Block. The text from choral reading is instead shifted to the head and tail activities, replacing material from simplified readers, whose use is discontinued. Head and tail activities are activities which use the same textual material to close one class and open the following one. Discontinuation of choral reading results in a less cluttered lesson in terms of number of activities and handouts. However, the main reason for the change is that it supports a more systematic approach to selection of blanks in fill-in-the-blank activities, involving pre-highlighting of three or four items of vocabulary. Using text from the novelization of the film *Spider-Man* (David 2002), the revision can be illustrated as follows.

Previous activity: choral reading

*"You are amazing," she said.*

*Slowly but surely, she was drawing closer and closer, until abruptly he made a quick motion with his hands, and when he spoke his voice was muffled once more. "Some people don't think so," he said, stepping slightly out of the shadows, staring at her through the white and opaque eyes of the mask.*

Present activity: fill-in-the-blanks

with	amazing	at	shadows	abruptly	when	so	muffled
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*"You are (.....), " she said.*

*Slowly but surely, she was drawing closer and closer, until (.....) he made a quick motion (.....) his hands, and (.....) he spoke his voice was (.....) once more. "Some people don't think (.....)," he said, stepping slightly out of the (.....), staring (.....) her through the white and opaque eyes of the mask.*

It can be seen that in the new head and tail activities, four of the blanks to be filled in are function words (*with, at, when, so*) and four are content words (*amazing, shadows, abruptly, muffled*). The content words

are chosen because they will occur again in the match-write-say activity in the Novelization Block. The selection of blanks is thus linked to other activities, and is not purely random.

As explained in Howell (2015), in the Novelization Block ten items of vocabulary (words or multi-word items) are chosen for highlighting from the novel extract. The highlighting is achieved by distributing the items (written in English and Japanese on slips of paper) to individual students and asking the students to match them. Reflecting on this practice, this activity goes more smoothly if, instead of plain white paper, the English items are printed on, say, green paper, and the Japanese on, say, yellow. This makes the process of mingling and matching in the classroom easier for students.

English slips (printed out in green; words which are also in fill-in-the-blanks activity are underlined).

1. *disappointment*
2. *muffled*
3. *passionately*
4. *before he could move*
5. *shadows*
6. *abruptly*
7. *lifted*
8. *leapt up*
9. *amazing*
10. *convinced*

Japanese slips (printed out in yellow)

- (a) 陰
- (b) 突然
- (c) 失望
- (d) 納得した
- (e) 情熱的
- (f) 彼が動かないうちに
- (g) 飛びあがり
- (h) 素晴らしい
- (i) くぐもっていた
- (j) めくり上げた

Colorization of pair-dictation handouts is also beneficial in the Novelization Block. Distributing the Student A and Student B handouts is smoother when they are differentiated by color, not just by textual heading.

Another adjustment to the Three Block method is the use of expansion drills in the ‘say’ part of the match-write-say activity. Instead of asking the participants to repeat only the word or expression after the teacher has given a model pronunciation, he or she expands the activity and leads a forwards or backwards build-up drill incorporating the original text surrounding each item. Thus, taking one of the words above as an example, after asking participants to repeat in chorus the word ‘shadows’, the teacher goes on to build up the expression backwards to ‘out of the shadows’. Apart from the general goal of making the next activity (student pair-dictation) easier, this particular example also adds practice in listening to the kind of reduced forms omnipresent in the speech of native speakers (*out of* > *outta*).

A final adjustment to the method occurs in the Movie Block. The adjustment here is to use Japanese audio coupled with English subtitles for first viewing of the scene and answering multiple-choice questions (MCQs). This prioritizes automatic comprehension (Japanese audio track) over L2 input (English subtitles) and, hopefully, makes the MCQs easy and less stressful for students with lower levels of English. In subsequent viewings, the audio track is then switched to English, providing L2 input in both audio and visual channels. On reflection, my present feeling is that this way of presenting film clips reduces stress while not necessarily reducing a sense of challenge. At least one student reported in questionnaire feedback that she found it useful to have a Japanese translation before listening to English:

- 日本語の訳のあとに、英語をきくことで理解が深まった視表現も覚えられた (*By listening to English after Japanese translation, my understanding deepened and I could learn [new] expressions.*)

To reformulate then from Howell (2015), the sequence of activities in the adjusted h3Bt method is as follows:

#### Head

- Peer-check fill-in-the-blanks exercise
- Write post-it message

#### Novel Block

- Skim-read Japanese translation
- Match-write-say vocabulary
- Pair dictation
- Listen and sequence

#### Movie Block

- While-viewing MCQs (Japanese audio, English subtitles)
- Dictate dialogue
- Watch excerpt (English audio, English subtitles)
- Practice and perform dialogue

#### Conversation Block

- Listen to explanation of scripted Q&A
- Chat and rotate

#### Tail

- Fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

The adjusted h3Bt method was used in spring 2015 with two 1<sup>st</sup>-year English Communication classes at Hiroshima University. One class comprised 24 students from the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry, and the other was a class of 73 non-English majors from the Faculty of Education. A simple questionnaire,

**FIGURE 1. Responses to a Post-Course Questionnaire on *Spider-Man* (number of students)**

	<i>The course was fun</i>	<i>The course was useful</i>
Strongly agree	86	56
Agree	11	18
Neutral		16
Disagree		6
Strongly disagree		

administered at the end of the course to ask participants whether it had been enjoyable and useful, yielded the responses shown in Figure 1.

These responses are convergent with questionnaire responses from the previous year indicating that for a large majority of students the h3Bt method is enjoyable, and this applies to both Education and Medical Science majors. A more nuanced majority, again in both groups, indicated that the course was useful, while a small minority of participants found it not to be useful. Questionnaire comments reflecting the benefits of movies for motivation included the following:

- 毎回毎回映画を見ながらの授業で、興味も持ちやすく毎時間がとても楽しみでした (*We watched a movie every time and it was easy to have interest. Every time it was a lot of fun.*)
- 次の映画が楽しみです (*I am looking forward to the next movie.*)

No voluntary adjustments were made to the Conversation Block of the method. This block involves pairs of students engaging in approximately two minutes of Q&A conversation (either freely or by following a script of questions with three possible answers for each question), rotating to switch partners after the two minutes have passed. Unfortunately physical classroom constraints in the Education Faculty precluded the Education majors from rotating freely. As an alternative, once pairs had finished talking, they were instructed to join the adjacent pair to do the activity again in groups of four. This appeared to function reasonably well, and could be considered as a secondary option when faced with such constraints. There is a possible objection to the frequent rotation of pairs in that it is impossible to develop a real conversation in two minutes or less. The Medical Science majors were therefore polled as to whether they would prefer (a) few rotations and longer time for each conversation or (b) frequent rotations and less time for each conversation. Out of a total of 21 student responses, 4 preferred option (a) while 17 preferred option (b). This result showed support for my own preference as the teacher, which is to encourage as large a number as possible of mini-interactions throughout the lesson.

*Spider-Man*, although a super-hero action movie, is also a romance involving a love triangle between the three main characters: Peter Parker/Spider-Man; Mary-Jane Watson; and Harry Osborne. Included amongst the scripted questions were therefore a number of questions about romantic relationships. It might be objected that for various reasons such questions are inappropriate in a foreign language classroom. To gauge some reaction from the students themselves, I asked both the Education and the Medical Science majors to rank the five most interesting from a complete list of the fifty scripted questions. The five questions which were most often selected as one of the top five were as follows:

- 1) *What kind of boy or girl is your type?*
- 2) *Who is your real hero?*
- 3) *Are you an alien?*
- 4) *What do you want to do after you graduate?*
- 5) *What would you do if your best friend started dating someone you secretly liked too?*

It can be seen that most of these ‘popular’ questions are about personal concerns: values, ambitions, dilemmas. Two of the five are directly related to romantic concerns. The third question represents absurdist British humor, but was apparently well received. Incidentally, one of the ‘humorous’ scripted answers is, “No, but I was abducted by aliens as a child”. Even politically relevant items of vocabulary such as “abduction” can be introduced in a humorous way! By contrast, a ‘serious’, issues-related question such as

“Which do you think is the best newspaper in Japan?” was included by only 2 out of 97 students in their top-five ranking. Reflecting on possible developments of the Conversation Block of the method, my intention is to maintain the present policy of rapid pair-rotations and continue to overweight the personal over the political when scripting Q&A handouts. There is also a possibility of giving students themselves control over when to rotate to new partners. This could be achieved by designating a specific student for this task in each lesson, and asking them to ring a small hand bell when they feel the time is appropriate.

## SUPPLEMENTATION

A point of interest in the use of popular culture in foreign language teaching is to what extent it is possible to integrate various popular media when preparing English courses. In recent years I have been exploring ways of using popular songs. Many teachers in various countries have used songs, both for their emotional resonance as well as for their linguistic characteristics, such as the use of rhythm and rhyme (e.g. Montaner 2006). In Japan, for example, Teruhiko Kadoyama and Simon Capper have co-authored a text book entitled ‘English with Hit Songs’ (Kadoyama & Capper, 2011). A feature of this book is that it is based on a compilation of hit records from Sony Music (the ‘MAX BEST’ CD compilation). It includes hits from best-selling artists such as Celine Dion, Ricky Martin, Oasis and Mariah Carey. But a possible drawback of this kind of course is that the songs are by different artists and from different genres of popular music. There is no strong narrative or cultural development from one unit to the next. I have tried to counter this objection in my own classes by taking an approach that values groups of songs on the basis of the esteem in which they are held in Anglo-American culture, as evidenced by the existence of secondary literature about them. Thus I have given courses on ‘The Beatles’ and ‘Classic American Musicals’. Problems nevertheless appear to remain. The Beatles, despite their historical importance, may not resonate with young Japanese adults quite as much as they do with Western baby boomer teachers. And it was only with hindsight that I realized just how difficult in terms of ludic and allusional richness the lyrics of classic musicals could be. There has been a greater sense of satisfaction with classes where songs have been used to introduce or illustrate social issues in recent Anglo-American history, for example by juxtaposing *Strange Fruit* (Billie Holliday’s signature song about the lynching of African-Americans) with extracts from the American Declaration of Independence (“All men are born equal” etc.). Here the songs are less central compared to ad hoc song compilations or approaches based primarily on the cultural prestige of the works or the artists themselves.

It may be that songs are best used in a supplementary role. And it is in this sense they can be used as a supplementation to the ‘h3Bt’ method. Musical supplementation can be achieved by using a musical film with an accompanying novelization and its translation. A good example of this is Robert Wise’s film *West Side Story*, based on the famous Broadway show with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. In fact, choosing *West Side Story* also has the benefits of cultural importance in view of the regularity with which the musical continues to be staged and the esteem in which the songs are held. Its principal theme of ethnic prejudice also remains a central social issue for most English-speaking societies. There are thirteen songs in the film, of which eleven were used in the course – *Something’s Coming*, *Maria*, *Tonight*, *America*, *Cool*, *One Hand One Heart*, *Tonight Quintet*, *I Feel Pretty*, *Somewhere*, *Gee Officer Krupke*, *A Boy Like That-I Have A Love*. The songs are used in the head and tail slots of each lesson. The lesson ends with a fill-in-the-blank activity in which students listen to the song that will feature in the

following lesson's movie excerpt. In this tail activity the students listen to an audio CD rather than watching the DVD or Blu-Ray excerpt, which is kept in anticipation of the next class. Stephen Sondheim's lyrics lend themselves well to systematic fill-in-the-blank activities because of the pervasive and clever use of rhyme. If the students know that the incomplete word rhymes with a word from the end of the preceding or succeeding line, it makes the activity more predictable and easy to complete. The humorous use of rhyme in the following extract from the song *America* is a good example (numbers in brackets indicate the number of missing letters).

Anita:

*Buying on credit is so nice.*

Bernardo:

*One look at us and they charge tw..... (3)*

Consuelo:

*I'll have my own washing machine.*

Chino:

*What will you have, though, to keep cl..... (3)?*

Anita:

*Skyscrapers bloom in America.*

Girls and Boys:

*Cadillacs zoom in America.*

*Industry boom in America.*

*Twelve in a r..... (3) in America.*

Anita:

*Lots of new housing with more space.*

Bernardo:

*Lots of doors slamming in our fa..... (2).*

At the end of the lesson students submit their completed sheets to the teacher. Peer correction is carried out at the head of the next lesson using a fair version.

It should be mentioned at this point that there are some differences between the Broadway musical and the film version of *West Side Story*, and precisely one of the main differences is found in the song *America*. In the Broadway musical it is sung only by the Puerto Rican girls and is basically a celebration of life in New York, whereas in the film the Puerto Rican boys also take part, adding sarcastic repartee to the girls' praise of American life. In general, the film's language is somewhat 'cleaned up' to remove what was considered according to the mores of the day to be inappropriate for a 1961 movie audience. An example can be seen in the song *Gee Officer Krupke* where the Broadway lyrics, "My father is a bastard, my ma's an s.o.b.. My grandpa's always plastered..." are changed for the movie to, "My daddy beats my mommy, my mommy clobbers me. My grandpa is a Commie...". In the lesson it is therefore important to use the film soundtrack and not the Broadway version in the tail activity. I learned of these differences when I made the mistake of asking students to fill in blanks in the movie lyrics of this song while listening to a CD of the Broadway version. It should also be mentioned that the novelization (Shulman 1961) is a novelization of the musical, not the film. As a result of this, the pedagogic recycling in the Movie Block of material from the Novelization Block is looser than that in *Spider-Man*, where the novelization uses dialogue from the film almost verbatim. This is illustrated in the following extract in which the leaders of the two gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, arrange for a 'war council'.

### Novelization (p.2)

*“Let’s step outside,” Riff suggested.*

*Before Bernardo favoured Riff with a cynical smile, he moved his right hand to indicate Anita, Stella, Margarita and the other girls. “My boys and I will not leave our ladies alone. Where could we meet you in – say an hour?”*

*“In front of the candy store in the middle of the block?” Riff suggested.*

*“Why not the candy store next to where I live?” Bernardo said, after a short laugh. “We will meet you in front of the Coffee Pot, that’s neutral territory.”*

### Movie (Riff and Bernardo)

*- Let’s go outside.*

*- I would not leave the ladies here alone with your kind around. We will meet you at midnight.*

*- Doc’s candy store?*

*- Mmm-hmm.*

It can be seen that as well as a content change (*the Coffee Pot > Doc’s candy store*), there are also some changes in the wording of the dialogue.

Supplementing the h3Bt method by including a focus on songs allows us to add an additional popular medium to the lessons with an added potential for emotional resonance. However, it also risks negating the simplifying benefits of the adjustments to the method described in the previous section. To obviate this risk, I decided to drop one activity from the Novel Block (the listening task requiring vocabulary to be sequenced in textual order) and also one activity from the Movie Block (while-viewing MCQs). The sequence of activities for the supplemented h3Bt method for musical films is as follows.

### Head

- Peer-check song vocabulary
- Write post-it message

### Novel Block

- Skim-read Japanese translation
- Match-write-say vocabulary
- Complete text with words from a vocabulary box
- Pair dictation

### Movie Block

- Watch excerpt (including song)
- Dictate dialogue
- Practice and perform dialogue

### Conversation Block

- Listen to explanation of scripted Q&A
- Chat and rotate

### Tail

- Listen to next week’s song and fill in blanks.

Unfortunately, although this version of the Three-Block Method supplemented by song has been implemented once, specific classroom circumstances at the time were an obstacle to administering a questionnaire as to



enjoyment and usefulness. But participants certainly appeared to like the creative excellence and emotional power of *West Side Story*, and it is hoped to administer a questionnaire to students in January 2016.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article has reported further developments of the method of teaching English based on movies and novels which was outlined in last year's edition of this journal (Howell 2015). The developments include adjustment involving resequencing of blocks, reduction of activities, colorization of hand-outs, use of expansion drills, increase of L1 input; and supplementation by popular music. The article also outlined how songs from musical films can be used as head and tail activities, using the example of *West Side Story*. Questionnaire feedback suggested the adjusted method remains enjoyable for most students, but feedback on musical supplementation has not been collected yet. Looking to the near future, I hope to add to the adjusted and supplemented repertoire, using Christopher Nolan's film *Batman Begins* and the retro musical *Grease*. An already completed plan involves 'bolting together' the Three Block method with the Comic Book method described in Howell (2014), using Stephenie Meyer's novel *Twilight* and its spin-off movie and graphic novels. It is also hoped to gather continuing feedback on questions used in the Conversation Block of the method, with the intention of building up a bank of scripted Q&A that can be drawn on in future materials development.

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## ABSTRACT

### **Reflections on the Three-Block Movie-English Method: Adjustment and Supplementation**

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This article outlines and reflects on five adjustments made over the course of a year to the author's 'three-block' lesson method introduced in Howell (2015). The five adjustments are: resequencing of the activity blocks; reduction in the number of activities; colorization of the handouts; use of expansion drills; and increase in L1 input. In addition, a supplementation of the method using popular songs is presented, exemplified by the musical film 'West Side Story'.

## 要 約

### Three-Block Movie-English Method に対する省察 — 修正と補助教材の使用 —

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本稿は、映画と小説化された作品を用いる Three-Block Method (Howell, 2015) に対し、過去 1 年間で施した 5 つの修正、すなわち、ブロックの並べかえ、アクティビティの削減、プリントのカラー化、応用練習の使用、L1 インプットの充実を概観するものである。また、ミュージカル映画中の楽曲が Three-Block Method の補助教材としてどのように使用されうるのかを、映画『West Side Story』に焦点をあて詳説する。